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Research to Action:

Make Girls a Priority in Florida

Executive Summary

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POLICY CENTER
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Florida Women's Funding Alliance
Transforming the Lives of Women & Girls in the State of Florida
Through Our Collective Voice and Resources

Florida
Philanthropic
Network

Make Girls a Priority in Florida

The Delores Barr Weaver Policy Center was commissioned by the Florida Women's Funding Alliance to conduct research on the status of girls in Florida. The first publication, *The Status of Girls in Florida: Educational Attainment and Disparities by County* (2019), found that some girls are progressing in school and moving forward, girls are closing some of the gender gaps in testing, and a greater share of young women ages 18–24 are enrolled in college. Despite these gains, the data shed light on the invisible groups of girls who are falling further behind. The second publication, *The Status of Girls Well-Being in Florida* (2019), investigated the indicators of well-being. This third publication of the Status of Girls series, *Research to Action: Make Girls a Priority in Florida,* highlights where to invest to improve outcomes for girls.

> **The data show that many girls are in peril. They experience alarming rates of violence and victimization in their communities, schools, and homes. The rates of hopelessness, suicide ideation, and substance use among girls must compel our communities and state to take action.**

Every year, we lose girls to school dropout, suicide, sex trafficking, and juvenile justice system involvement. The time is overdue to make girls a priority in the state of Florida. There are simply too many girls at great risk for trauma, mental health challenges, exploitation, and system involvement. And, we can learn from the girls themselves about how to best support them.

Why the time is NOW!

Victimization is rampant.

Violence and victimization occur in homes. In 2018, 7,500 girls were removed from their homes due to physical abuse, sexual abuse, domestic violence, or parental drug abuse. Gendered sexual violence is evident; one in ten girls reported having been raped. Sexual exploitation is rampant; during 2018, there were 1,500 sexual exploitation investigations, a number that increases every year.

The threat to girls' emotional well-being warrants serious attention.

What girls experience in community, schools, and homes is apparent in their well-being indicators. Using the YSAS 2018 survey of middle-school and high-school students, more than half of girls reported feelings of sadness. One-third reported feeling "sometimes life is not worth it." And one-fifth reported suicide ideation. More than half of girls reported use of substances, with alcohol, vapor products, and marijuana being the most common. Most notably, one in four girls reported a lack of access to a parent for help with their problems.

> **Invest in innovative, local, girl-centered services specifically designed to address the needs of girls.**
>
> Rely on interventions backed by research to create safety and reduce the risk to girls for depression, suicide, anxiety, substance use, and increased stress in adulthood.

Many girls feel unsafe at school.

Overall, one-third of girls reported feeling unsafe at school. One-tenth avoided school because of those feelings. Girls who feel unsafe in school reported higher instances of bullying, hopelessness, and sadness. They were also more likely to receive school suspensions.

Although physical bullying is more prevalent among boys; two-thirds of girls reported verbal bullying, and one-third reported cyberbullying. Verbal bullying is defined as taunting, teasing, calling names, or excluding or ignoring others in a mean way. Cyberbullying is defined as sending mean messages or posting hurtful information on the internet. One-fourth of girls reported having no teacher to talk to, one on one. Black girls in middle and high school are more likely to report a suspension (Black girls 15%, multi-racial and Native American girls 8%, Hispanic girls 6%, White girls 4%, and Asian girls 2%). Suspensions push girls out of school and increase the disconnection.

Educational attainment varies by race, ethnicity, and geography.

Although graduation rates are at an all-time high, cohort-based dropout calculations are limited and create barriers for understanding the true numbers and reasons that youth are not enrolled in school. In 2018, 12,000 girls ages 16–19 were not enrolled in school and were not in the labor force. Native American girls and some rural communities had dropout rates two times higher than the statewide average of 3%. One-fifth of girls in third grade were reading below Level 1 on the FSA-ELA. Retention was highest in third grade. Of the 8,033 girls retained in 2017, 40% were Black, and 37% were Hispanic.

Girls have high rates of juvenile justice system involvement.

Florida relies too heavily on the juvenile justice system due to a lack of alternatives. In 2018–2019, 9,000 girls were arrested, over 2,000 detained, and 317 were locked up and sent away from their communities. Florida has

Recommendations

Our recommendations include changes to policy, programming, public education and awareness, process, and training for each of the major findings.

higher arrest and incarceration rates among girls ages 10–17 when compared to Texas, California, and New York.

Priority Populations

Certain groups of girls are at far greater risk for trauma, mental health challenges, exploitation, and system involvement than their peers. These inequities are important, as they call for different interventions for girls who are falling behind. Our research clearly shows that the groups of girls in the greatest danger are girls of color, girls from rural areas, and girls that identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT).

Today with COVID-19, many girls feel more isolated due to physical distancing and increased fear. Current data show an increase in child removals from home for reasons such as parents' inability to cope, parental drug abuse, physical abuse, and domestic violence. It is vital that we continue to monitor the impact of COVID-19 on girls' well-being and their existing struggles with suicide ideation, depression, victimization, lack of support and family connection.

Kickstart the movement.

Convene a two-day Summit on Making Girls a Priority in Florida.

Bring together policymakers, citizen leaders, advocates, funders, appointed officials, researchers, and practitioners with girls and youth who identify as female to review the findings from the Status of Girls research and discuss systemic reform. Focus on their needs. Elevate the voices of girls, highlight the research findings, and build awareness locally and statewide.

Launch a campaign to Make Girls a Priority in public awareness and education.

Problem: **Victimization of girls, K–12**

Solution: **Create a culture of nonviolence through policy and practice.**

- Address sexual violence.
- Educate on affirmative consent.
- Invest in primary prevention approaches.
- Build skills to prevent violence. Include empathy, communication, and conflict management.

Problem: **Lack of emotional well-being**

Solution: **Fund school-based mental health services.**

- Critically review the use of the Baker Act (ensure parental notification, set age limit at 10).
- Support recommendations of the Safety Commission (access to counselors).
- Train frontline workers.
- Expand trauma assessment tools.

Problem: **Lack of school safety**

Solution: **Change discriminatory policy and practice.**

- Address bullying.
- End discrimination based on hair or dress codes.
- Ban policies that push girls out of school.
- Stop criminalizing normal behavior.
- Place girl advocates in schools.
- Pilot school and community partnerships.

Problem: **Disparities in educational attainment**

Solution: **Implement responsive practices.**

- Invest in high-quality Pre–K.
- Ban suspensions of K–3 students.
- Implement interventions for students who are falling behind.
- End discriminatory disciplinary practices.

Problem: **High rates of juvenile justice system involvement**

Solution: **Change discriminatory policies.**

- Ban arrests for children under 10.
- Reintroduce and pass the Kaia Rolle Act.
- Release low-risk youth from custody.
- Use community-based services.
- Ban solitary confinement of children.
- Implement specialized respite services.
- Get training out to domestic violence shelter workers.
- Fund alternatives to detention.
- Fund a female-only probation unit for girls with extensive trauma.

Partner with girls to impact change.

Girls must be leaders in design, content, and execution.

Girls learn to be activists for positive change.

Enables adults to learn about what girls experience at school, in their communities, and with the families.

Get busy.

Provide spaces for local communities to review and use data to improve their programming.

- Shift training and practice in education, child welfare, and juvenile justice systems.
- Engage girls in creating the solutions they need.
- Analyze and report all data by race and ethnicity within gender to accurately calculate trends.
- Increase the types of data to improve responses. Include immigrants, refugees, homeless, and LGBTQ girls.
- Train law enforcement, judges, state attorneys, and public defenders in topics such as predatory males, coercion tactics, adultification, girls' adolescent development, racial bias, data trends, historical and racial trauma, intrafamily conflict, crisis management, and de-escalation techniques.